

FIVE FARTHINGS

A London Story

by

MONICA REDLICH

Margin Notes Books

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Margin Notes Books have been unable to trace the heirs to the estate of Monica Redlich. Royalties have been set aside and the publishers would be pleased to hear from the heir.

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info@marginnotesbooks.com

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MONICA REDLICH

Monica Redlich (1909-1965) is perhaps most known today for *The Nice Girl's Guide to Good Behaviour* (1935, republished 2004). She was the daughter of a clergyman and brought up in Lincolnshire and London, but mainly lived abroad after her marriage to Sigurd Christensen, a Danish diplomat, in 1937. Life in Denmark, the U.S.A. and Spain gave her material for a number of travel books including *Everyday England* and *Danish Delight*. However, she had previously published a number of novels for adults and children.

Five Farthings (1939) was her second and last book for children after *Jam Tomorrow* (1937). *Five Farthings* received very favourable notices in the contemporary broadsheet press and later from the critic Marcus Crouch who neatly summarised the novel as 'a story of an exceptionally nice family'.¹ Unlike the more well-known *Jam Tomorrow*, it was never reprinted and is now a very scarce title. Both are family stories dealing with genteel poverty and a family's attempts to improve their prospects. While *Jam Tomorrow* is the story of a widowed rector and his chaotic family in a small village, *Five Farthings* introduces the reader to an ordinary family, two parents and three children, forced to move from Sussex to the City of London while the father is treated in hospital. Mrs Farthing returns to work in a smart department store and the three children find that London life has its own unexpected freedoms and opportunities.

¹ Marcus Crouch. *Treasure Seekers and Borrowers. Children's Books in Britain 1900-1960*. London: The Library Association, 1970 (updated edition), p. 78.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This is a complete and unabridged version of Monica Redlich's novel *Five Farthings*. First published by J.M. Dent in 1939 it was never reprinted. Errors in the original texts, such as repeated words over a line, have not been amended.

While the author has used terms such as 'nigger' or 'queer', which may have changed in their meaning or effect, they have not been updated or omitted in this new edition.

*'You owe me five farthings'
Say the bells of St Martin's*

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FOR MERCY CLARKE

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A NOTE ON THE FARTHINGS' LONDON

The Farthings' London is a little different from that to be found in the directories or on any map. Overton House, where their flat is, will not be discovered by any one walking round St Paul's Churchyard. Magnificat Alley and Watchman Lane do not exist, even under another name: nor does St Sebastian's Church, though it contains many features which I feel certain Sir Christopher Wren would certainly have put in if he had designed it.

My publishing friends in London will find no portraits of themselves in this tale, for Messrs Laurence Broadstreet is an entirely imaginary firm, and the people in it are imaginary also. The actual Book Fair which I have described has not yet taken place, though it may do so at any moment! There is, of course, a Book Fair in London every autumn, the *Sunday Times* National Book Fair, which I strongly recommend to readers of this book.

One cannot find Messrs Greencoat's shop anywhere in London, or Whitefriars School, or St Monan's, or the hotel in Kensington, or Badger's Mews. Otherwise, however, everything which the Farthings discovered is still there for other people to discover also.

M.R.

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

THE FARTHINGS ARRIVE

IN a small hotel in South Kensington, five new-comers to London were getting ready for lunch. The Farthings had been in London before, but only as visitors, and they were trying hard to get used to the very strange fact that, from to-day on, they lived there.

They did not much care for their new surroundings at present. The air in London was stuffy, the streets were dull and smelled of petrol, and the hotel where they had just arrived was duller still and smelled of yesterday's cabbage. Vivien Farthing, washing her hands at the little wooden washstand in the bedroom she was sharing with Dinah, gave a sigh which her young sister would certainly have remarked upon if she had not been busy with her violin, plucking gently at its beloved strings to see how it had survived the journey.

Like the rest of the Farthing family, Vivien faced the day with very mixed feelings. She was seventeen. She understood better than either Dinah or John what a big upheaval this move to London had meant, and how long it might be before they could have a settled and peaceful home again. But if Mr Farthing could be cured, as the doctors said he could ... well, then it was a thousand times worth it. Vivien looked round the dingy, cramped bedroom, twisted the soap in her hands, and, forgetting that she had washed already, began carefully to wash again.

'Oh, come on, Vivien. Aren't you ready yet?'

Dinah bounced on the bed to show her impatience, and got up again even more quickly when she found that below its layer of springs her bed had some exceedingly

hard foundation. A clock outside struck one, and immediately afterwards a gong boomed out from downstairs—a majestic and dignified boom, which hardly matched the smell of warm mutton fat that had now joined the smell of cabbage.

Vivien looked at her nose in the spotted mirror, and took out her powder-box. She briefly inspected her sister.

‘Have you washed?’

‘No.’

‘Aren’t you dirty from the train?’

‘Not in the least’.

Dinah shook herself haughtily, then put her head on one side, looked up, and smiled. Dinah’s smile was a revelation. Her curly red hair, fair skin, and hazel eyes in themselves made her remarkable; when she smiled her whole face lit up with life and the force of her personality. It was John’s considered opinion that Dinah would be beautiful when she grew up—‘I mean, if her teeth don’t grow crooked and her nose get long,’ he would cautiously add.

Vivien too thought Dinah had a good share of the family gifts—striking looks, an outstanding talent for the violin, and a personality so strong that Vivien often felt blurred and indecisive beside her. Yet Vivien herself was at least as good-looking as Dinah. She had the same fair skin, and had very thick chestnut hair with gold lights in it. Her eyes were dark blue, with long lashes which made them seem even darker. Her nose was short and straight, her mouth charming. She was slim like her mother, was by no means tall, and moved gracefully. At seventeen she was not nearly so sure of herself as Dinah at twelve; but, unlike Dinah, she had one great ambition always in front of her, though unlike Dinah she did not tell all the world about it.

Vivien was going to write. She had in fact written a lot already, though no paper except her school magazine had had the pleasure of publishing any of her work. But from to-day on, her career was really beginning. She had written a story which she knew without question was the best she had done yet: a story which was as near as she could possibly make it to those she was always reading in the *Woman's Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Good Homecraft*, and other such magazines. It was in her handbag at this moment, copied out very neatly, and enclosed, with a stamped envelope addressed to herself in disguised handwriting, in a package which would be posted to the editor of *Good Homecraft* the moment she could escape from the family and look up the address in a telephone directory.

'Shall we go down in the lift?' she inquired, having powdered her nose to the accompaniment of Dinah's loud, patient sighings.

'No, let 's walk,' said Dinah cheerfully. 'I want to see some more of this perfectly beastly place.'

The atmosphere of the hotel got if anything thicker as one went deeper into it, and by the time they had passed two landings identical with their own, and come to the ground floor, Vivien felt she could hardly breathe. Strange, tropical plants and ferns clawed at them with huge leaves. The hall was dark as well as stuffy. They could hear the muffled clatterings of a meal from some room on their right, and they could hear Herbert, the hall porter, whistling softly through his teeth close at hand, though it took them some moments for them to make out where he stood. A stout, bent man with white hair came shuffling through the hall, and peered at them intently as he passed.

'Let 's find the others,' said Dinah in a rather subdued

voice.

They went to the drawing-room, where they had all agreed to meet. John was there before them, disconsolately turning over a three-months-old copy of the *Lady*, and Mr and Mrs Farthing arrived only a moment afterwards.

‘Are you hungry? Sorry to keep you waiting—Daddy dropped the soap into his suitcase.’

‘Yes, and it was wet,’ added Mr Farthing, his eyes twinkling as if, whoever might be an invalid, it was certainly not he. ‘Well, we ’d better go in to lunch, if you ’re all ready. The manageress gave us a strong hint that we ’re expected to be punctual for meals here, and we haven’t any too much time if Mummy and I are to get off to the specialist.’

Vivien had been curious to see what the other inhabitants of this strange hotel could be like, and when she was settled between her father and John at the table which had been reserved for them, she took a good look round at all the other people in the room. There were not many of them, and they were all, to say the least of it, as much interested in the Farthing family as Vivien was in them. Two grey-haired ladies, thin, straight-backed, and looking as if it was only by mistake that they had left their lorgnettes upstairs, sat at the next table. When Vivien looked up they looked down, and when she looked down they looked up, as if they were playing some complicated game of hide-and-seek. The stout, white-haired man she had seen in the hall was sucking in soup with a burbling noise for which Dinah would have been severely reprimanded, and dropping occasional drops of it down the napkin tucked under his chin. A sad-looking husband and wife with very yellow faces sat at the table in the window, and beyond them was a party of three stout ladies who alone of everybody there seemed bold enough

to talk in their natural voices and carry on a conversation. They were talking about somebody called Milly, and their opinion of Milly's husband was decidedly low. The only other guest was a little woman no taller than Dinah, with grey hair sticking out in thin, frizzy corkscrew curls and a face rather like a bird, who gave the impression of hopping up and down every time she took a mouthful.

Vivien gave a little, involuntary shiver. Was this really what London was like? Was it here that she was to find dramatic, real-life subjects to write about, and begin her career as an author? She took a tight hold of the handbag in which her story was hidden, and gave her attention to the typewritten menu which her father, with a smile and a careful absence of comment, was holding out for her to study.

The Farthings had lived since 1919 in Sussex, on the coast not far from Worthing. More fortunate than many demobilized officers, Mr Farthing had been able to take up again after the War the work which he liked and was qualified for, and had become agent on the estate of a distant cousin. It was in Cousin Raymond's house that he met the eighteen-year-old Margot Bradley, who had scandalized half her family and delighted the other half by running away from home to go to London and work in a big dress shop. They fell in love on the front at Worthing—it was a story that the children demanded from them over and over again; were married on a wet Friday morning in the village church; and had continued the story in proper fairy-tale manner by living happily ever after.

In their little house among woods looking over the sea, Vivien, John, and Dinah had been born. The beach, the sea, the woods, and the downs, had been their

hunting-grounds since they could remember anything, and though Vivien and John had both been away at boarding school, no other place had ever seemed half as exciting as Berrings. Towns were all right for an occasional expedition. London was exciting, certainly, but in a vast and even frightening manner, and they generally came away almost with relief from visits to their relations there; but home was the place where one could bathe, and bask in the sun, and take Sammy Spaniel for long walks over the downs, and find the first snowdrops long before other people had even thought of them.

But lately, things had changed. The walks over the downs had slowly been turning into walks down a row of red-brick villas. The bathes now took place from a beach lined with two rows of bathing-huts. Sammy Spaniel had been run over and killed by a motor bicycle from the bungalow colony just at the bottom of the lane. The place where every spring of her life Dinah had picked snowdrops was now the back yard of a house with the name of 'Wy-worrie.' It was heartbreaking to see it all; and Mr Farthing's cousin, heartbroken just as they were, and crippled by estate duties and increasing income tax, had at last been forced to sell his house and grounds to the ever-hungry builders.

The Farthings' home, like his, simply ceased to exist. New 'sun-houses' were to be built, with flat roofs, glass-covered balconies, and a dozen other improvements which, as Vivien angrily said, 'we have all managed beautifully without for years.' Mr Farthing's work ceased also, and they were faced with the serious problem of what to do next.

'Why not find another place like this?' said Dinah, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

'Not much hope, I'm afraid,' her father answered.

There are ten chaps like me for every place that still needs us. No—as a matter of fact, Mummy and I have been thinking of London.’

‘London?’

‘London! Well, of all places in the world—’

The suggestion was greeted, as he knew it would be, with horror; but he explained that his cousin could get him into a big London firm for property management, and that a safe job like that, no matter where, was not to be turned down lightly. The family were obliged to admit that this was true, and they said no more at the time, though they said a good deal to each other on their last sad rounds of all their favourite walks.

Vivien, John, and most of all Dinah, had always felt well able to look after their own private affairs: but where the family as a whole was concerned Mr and Mrs Farthing as a matter of course explained to them whatever was going on. They knew the family income, and they helped to decide how it was spent. Dinah’s violin lessons, for example, were agreed by all of them—Dinah not excluded—to be of the first importance; but when Vivien had wanted to go winter-sporting, the answer had been that she could go if she liked, but it would mean so much less for their holiday in the summer. Holidays, dentists and doctors, parties, school—everything in the Farthing family was a matter, not for orders, but for discussion. Cousin Raymond’s generation thought it strange, but they seemed to get along very well all the same, and not even Aunt Harrison herself could have denied that they were happy.

But before they left their home something else happened: something which made London inevitable. During the War, in Salonika, Mr Farthing had developed some obscure fever which he had never since properly

got rid of. Aggravated, perhaps, by the hard work of arranging the sale of land and property, this suddenly became worse, and on some days he was obliged to stay in bed and was hardly able to move. The specialists in London were convinced that by some special electrical treatment this could be cured. If he took the London post which was open to him, he could go for treatment in the evenings after work, and they hoped that in a few months he would be quite well again.

All other plans were left undecided until it could be seen how this worked. They hoped most keenly that they could soon make a home of their own in London. Mr Farthing's pension, and Mrs Farthing's very small private income, would make it possible for them to manage somehow through the first difficult months, but they would not have even half as much money as they had been used to, and they would have to be extremely careful. Dinah and John were of course both to go to school—where they did not yet know, though Dinah had an idea that a school in Kensington, St Monan's, would suit her very well. Good violin lessons were the only aspect of school that really interested her, and a friend of hers who was at St Monan's said that it had a good violin master and a flourishing orchestra. John was now thirteen, and until lately there had been no doubt that he would go on to Shrewsbury, where his father and all the Farthings had been before him. But now, suddenly, there was not enough money. He was not up to scholarship standard, and unless the family affairs took a sudden turn for the better, all they could do would be to send him to one of the big London day schools.

As for Vivien herself, no one in the family knew yet that she had her own future all planned out. They knew, of course, that she was interested in writing and in

reading, but they had so little idea of the real state of affairs that Mr and Mrs Farthing talked of her taking a course in either journalism or domestic science, whichever she preferred, as if literature was to be considered on the same level as scrubbing floors and learning to make milk puddings. Vivien thanked them, and said only that she thought she would like the journalism course best. There would be time to tell them later; and she looked forward most heartily to the day when she could first show them her name in print, and prove to them that her career had settled itself.